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A Microwave Delusion?

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With espionage, mysterious rays and rumors of a cancer epidemic as the principal ingredients, the long-running Soviet irradiation of the U.S. embassy in Moscow has become an infamous classic in the folklore of international dirty tricks.

Now, at last, we're on the verge of some clarity being introduced into this puzzling situation, thanks to a nearly completed, massive health study of all U.S. personnel associated with the embassy over the past 25 years. Conducted by the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, the study—now in the final stages of statistical analysis—should finally settle the troublesome question of whether the Soviets have been deliberately sickening the embassy staff.

If the results show that to be the case, then we're in for a new round of nasty contention. But if, as many specialists insist, the radiation is low level and apparently harmless, then it's worth considering how a few facts and a lot of hysterical ignorance have acquired an unjustified importance in an international relationship that suffers from all too many real problems. In short, the irradiation saga provides a disturbing illustration of how the bristling Soviet-American rivalry tends to

magnify points of friction and give credence to formulations that depict the other side as monstrous.

What's known about the irradiation of the embassy is that it persists, but there is no certainty as to why or to what effect. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of allegations concerning dire health effects on the embassy staff. Three former ambassadors are said to have died of cancer that was presumably contracted in the line of duty in Moscow. And two years ago, Zbigniew Brzezinski, prior to his White House appointment, was widely quoted—though he now denies it—as saying that the Moscow embassy cancer rate is "the highest in the world."

To add to the melodramatic aspects of this peculiar affair, the Defense Department some years ago consumed \$4.6 million in research aimed at determining whether the Moscow microwave waves might have a psychologically disorienting effect on embassy staff members. For that purpose, the Defense Department employed trained monkeys in a project called "Pandora," which included a subproject called "Pandora/Bizarre." The monkeys went about their surrogate diplomatic duties without impair-

ment, but with the irradiation continuing, the concern has not lessened.

Though the purpose is unknown, repeated speculation links the microwave waves to Soviet attempts to eavesdrop on the embassy or to efforts to foul up the embassy's own attempts to eavesdrop on Soviet communications. However, with rare exceptions, the reported levels of radiation have been relatively low—5 microwatts per square centimeter of exposed area, which, as the State Department points out to calm embassy staff fears, is half of the Soviets' own strict exposure standards and vastly below U.S. standards.

In any case, though the State Department knew of the microwave bombardment as far back as the early 1960s, it inexcusably concealed the problem from the embassy staff until 1975, when the levels briefly shot up to 18 microwatts. At that point, radiation-absorbing metal screens were installed on the windows, and the staff—angered and alarmed by both the problem and the Department's deceptiveness—was given an explanation of the situation. Rumors then sprouted of an abnormal incidence of cancer, including a report by a physician who said that the incidence of breast cancer was 40 percent above normal.

Omitted from those reports was that fact that many of those allegedly afflicted by the radiation had worked in parts of the embassy that were untouched by the microwave beams. That doesn't preclude the possibility of exposure, but it raises doubts. Furthermore, cancer is not an uncommon affliction, and shocked colleagues and attending physicians are not well situated to assess whether its incidence in a mixed and changing group is out of line with statistical norms.

The Johns Hopkins study, covering some 6,500 persons is a prodigious exercise in epidemiology, given the complex comings and goings of so many people over a quarter of a century. But when the results are in, it should be possible at last to apply some rationality to a situation that has long been an ugly mystery.

In view of the prominence that the case has acquired in horror stories of East-West relations, it would be desirable to know whether the sickness reports are accurate or are simply an example of intense political antagonism giving rise to delusional perceptions. And if the latter is the case, it is interesting to speculate on other delusions that may appear as realities in Soviet-American relations.